Labor and Property: Locke vs Marx

By. Joshua D. Glawson

An anonymous source once said, “Both Locke and Marx place labor and property at the very heart of their political theories, yet the theories they construct on the basis of their respective views are vastly different. Whereas Locke contends that labor confers a right of private property and makes the preservation of private property a central element of his theory of politics, Marx argues that the proletariat’s labor is exploited in the capitalist mode of production and that capitalism alienates humans from their labor. Consequently, Marx defends a theory of politics that aims to eliminate exploitation and alienation through public control of the means of production.” Although I do not completely agree with this statement, I shall go through the pros and cons of both arguments for Locke and Marx in regards to their understanding and defense of private property, the proper role of government, and the economic system of capitalism.

Locke begins his portrayal of humans in a state of nature, prior to the creation of money, as being in need of working in order to survive from one day to the next. Man, i.e. humans, needs to work in gathering and storing food, building shelter, hunting, forming weapons, learning the art of fire, obtaining clothing, and so forth in no particular order. It is because man is not born with a very protective coat, shelter, weaponry, etc. as most animals are. We do not have the extreme strength of most animals, either. Therefore, man must work alone, or to be most flourishing he should work

with others in order to divide the labor necessary and focus on one thing at a time. This division of labor enhances the capabilities of surviving and thriving. Nevertheless, man accomplishes his own work as an individual, whether or not he collaborates with others.

Man has autonomy over himself and is responsible for his own actions and outcomes. He has property ownership within and over himself and the product of his work. This is known as the *workmanship model* of property. This work accomplished by the individual is his own doing. He spends his own time, his own energy, his own efforts in, for example, gathering acorns. The acorn tree may be free for all to gather from, so as to not hurt others he only gathers what he needs so that the potential remaining amount does not spoil. This anti-spoiling concept is that it prevents infringing on others' right to the same tree and acorns since it is not privately owned, thus allowing the most for more people. If everyone were to gather more than that which sustains them, and allowed spoiling, it would leave people hungry and dying. As an aside, it is important to recall that this is prior to the invention of money- no matter how much money is collected in a dynamic economy, spoilage for currency cannot occur.

If someone works for another person, they have a contractual agreement with the person for whom they work, and their payment, or compensation, is as stipulated by that contract. For example, if a man agrees to pick a certain number or weight of acorns for someone else for return compensation of five pounds of tobacco, that is Just according to

Locke. No one else has the authority to enter that exchange and declare otherwise; only the two in exchange have the ability to change the contract due to the personal property ownership each party has in themselves, their work, their actions, etc. This is equally applicable for a capitalist system and for a society and their respective state.

The concern for others, for Locke, is not simply out of mere practicality, but also in reverence to God who instilled man with reason, and that we are ultimately the property of God. This paradox of owning one's self while simultaneously being owned by God is summed up in that the ownership of self is granted while alive as being a steward of what is in the end, or afterlife, God's. For Locke, much like Adam Smith, the sentiment of morals is imperative in the world both prior to and post capitalism in order to respect the God-given rights man has acquired for being persons. These rights of Life, Liberty, and Property, being both from nature and God, cannot be subjugated by others or by a government.

The role of government, then, is to uphold and protect these natural rights and to not do so is breaking the covenant man has with God, and breaking the social contract in which society created states. For Locke, governments, or the state, was created in a social contract in order to protect the aforementioned rights, and because it was a historical contract of sorts, when one side breaks it there are repercussions and the contract is void. Such repercussions for a government breaking its side of the deal is that it can be peacefully or violently overthrown while casting man within

that state and society back into the state of nature or establishing a new form of government that does protect the inalienable natural rights of Life, Liberty, and Property.

When individuals infringe on the rights of others, they are to be punished by the state by fines, imprisonment, or death in some cases, according to Locke. This is the side that government has over the society in that it has coercive power to enforce the laws of nature and God. Locke also insists that not only should families teach their children, but state-ran education is also essential for the ongoing flourishing of society and ongoing protection of natural law. In a state of nature without a state, man can act as means of punishing those that do infringe on the natural rights of individuals. Locke goes further to say that if a man should so steal from you, you have the right to use death as a means to punish. However, since there is a state to uphold Justice, you are to handover means of Justice to the state in order to have it fair and equal for all, including the thief himself. For Locke, this is the limitation of government and sole role of government to protect Life, Liberty, and Property, maintain Justice with the capability of coercive powers, and educate children. Anything beyond this, for Locke, is an overreach of government.

Overall, property and the laborious means to gaining property is one of the most crucial elements in Locke's theory of labor and government. One not only has property within themselves, but also the work in which he does, what he says, his actions, and so forth. To eliminate private property

is to invalidate that which God and nature have granted, negating man's personal responsibility, and reducing mankind to nothing more than animals. To rid society of private property is to do away with the covenant between man and God, and to dispose of the contract between society and state. Furthermore, to discard these things is the destruction of Justice itself as being the division of labor, and the equal protection under the law of Life and Liberty, along with Property itself.

Karl Marx, on the other hand, does not believe in the ultimate ownership of private property as a means of production, i.e. capitalism. He is infamously critical of the system of capitalism as he saw the industrial revolution sweep across the world. His critique of capitalism and the industrial revolution was that it alienated and exploited the masses of people, leaving them as slaves to a system of an upper-class that owned all of those means of production and paid as low of wages as possible to the ones who actually work the factories and make the products.

Although Marx does acknowledge some of the benefits of capitalism, his manifesto consists in removing the private property of the elite class and putting it solely into the hands of the workers of the factories. He believes that people are better off working on their own as owners of the factories, and eventually having machines do all of the work necessary to sustain human life in his eventual utopia. Prior to the ability for machines to be the creators of all products, the workers will need to unite and by force take control and collective ownership of the factories. Marx does not seem to

think the private property of the owners or bosses matters. Much like Rousseau, Marx sees private property as a juridical construct created by society and not by nature, and Marx never really declares the process by which private property was once created. The original acquisition is left to the imagination for Marxists, because he does not stipulate the formation of such from one's original labor. Furthermore, Marx thinks that if one does own something, and they do what others will socially condemn as being wrong, they no longer have the rights to that property.

Marx was a leading economic thinker and proponent of the concept of *labor theory of value.* This theory, in short, is that the economic value for a product is determined by the amount of time and work typically put into the product made. He would not advocate for just mindlessly working on something, his claim was a legit amount of time, usually averaged much like car mechanics do today. That is to say, if the average mechanic takes 1 hour to fix something, but it can be done in a half hour by another mechanic, this half hour mechanic still gets paid for one hour of labor. In fact, this idea was first proposed by Adam Smith, and in a way this acts as a tangent from Smith to Locke, and between Lock and Marx.

Marx went a step further to use this concept as justification for advocating that the means of production should be owned solely by the workers, granting the capital, or accumulated labor, to them and their work. This accumulated labor includes the machines, tools, buildings, economic savings, etc. For Marx's theory, the supposed past exploitations and

alienation of the working class requires that even past capital must also be granted to this group in order for his concept of “Justice” to be accomplished. It seems Marx’s theory relies heavily on assumptions of past exploitations, and requires very little evidence in order to produce a conviction against the original owners of factories, their machines, products, etc. This, in fact, severs private property from Justice, and casts contracts into the garbage pile as if the employers were coercing people to work for them.

These two philosophers, Locke and Marx, have some good ideas in their concepts of labor and property. For Locke, I agree that Property is found within ourselves as being persons, and that what we labor for or own by other means, not including means of infringement on others of course, are our own. I also agree with Locke in that the sole purpose of government is to protect Life, Liberty, and Property. Without private property there can be no Justice. For Marx, I agree that workers need to often be considered when running a company; not as a matter of Justice, rather of practicality. A well-treated staff usually provides a higher level of service, but it is also typical that higher level of people are hired in the first place when employees are paying more.

I disagree with Locke in that the state has ultimate authority over the lives of criminals. If government’s role is to protect Life, Liberty, and Property, it must therefore not execute criminals under any circumstance, as that was not the original intent of state over society. To execute by

means of death penalty is to remove the inalienable, God-given, right of Property within themselves, i.e. Life, granted to that individual being killed. If that person has no right to take his own Life, neither does anyone else, no matter what is done. Whereas Liberty, is to one's own discretion, yet not to be infringed upon by others, a crime against others' Life, Liberty, or Property, is one casting their own Liberty to the wind.

I disagree with Marx more than Locke on most of these concerns, specifically in that the masses do not have more rights or claims than the individual. To declare that a working-class is entitled to the rightfully acquired private property of individuals that own these factories is an infringement on the Life, Liberty, and Property of the owners themselves and the destruction of Justice. The sweeping assumption and accusation that the wealthy are innately evil and all corruptly taking advantage of workers, is far from the truth and historically inaccurate to the point of extreme caricaturization. Capitalism has saved more lives, helped more people globally get out of adjunct poverty, and bettered the lives of all than any other system ever created by mankind. If the working-class was apt to take aim against injustices, alienation, or mistreatments done by employers, in order to maintain Justice, they should simply start their own companies. To use coercion in order to force people to do what is right, it negates the good being done because the person doing it has no intent of good in the first place. In order for actual good to be done, it must be done freely.

As for the specific *value theory of labor,* I disagree that price values are objective. Much like Carl Menger and the Austrian School of Economics, I believe that pricing is subjective to the person selling and those buying. The person buying has the ultimate say-so, in that a company needs to know how much people will be willing to pay for something in order for that company to sustain itself. No matter how much work is put into something, it does not matter if no one is willing to buy it, if it is indeed for sell. Furthermore, subjective pricing is not concerned about supply and demand, per se, in that if no one is willing to buy it although it is extremely rare, it does not matter from a business perspective. The same goes for paying for labor. If the labor done can be done by anyone, the value of that labor is lessened. I also do not believe I have the right to interfere with someone else's agreement to work or hire. I see the system of capitalism as the peaceful and voluntary exchange of goods and services between people.

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